



## Places in Brent

# Willesden Green

### Grange Museum of Community History and Brent Archive

Willesden Green is in eastern Brent. The High Road forms the centre of an 'X' of roads connecting Neasden and Church End with Cricklewood and Kilburn.

#### Early history

The name Willesden may derive from the Anglo-Saxon 'Wiell-dun', meaning 'the hill of the spring'. Alternatively it may combine the Anglo-Saxon word for 'hill' with the name of a Saxon settler. "Wellesdone" is recorded in the Domesday Book (1086). There was a Willesden family, almost certainly named after the place, in the area from 1278 to 1494. By 1425 they held the lease of the manor of Oxgate in the north of Willesden parish.

Willesden Green, the largest hamlet in the parish of Willesden, started as a settlement in a woodland clearing. This clearing became a large green in the middle of the parish. Soon there was a significant group of houses around the green. Several of these were farms, one of which dated back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

Most of the land in the area belonged to the dean and chapter of St Paul's cathedral, though some land to the south was the property of All Souls' College, Oxford. There were two manors nearby, the manor of Bounds bordering Willesden Lane, and the manor of Chambers, named after Richard de Camera, an early

13<sup>th</sup> century cleric. This manor owned tenements at Willesden Green.

There were 11 ratepayers at Willesden Green in 1687. The figure was virtually unchanged in 1720. By 1738 the green was surrounded by buildings. The 'Spotted Dog' existed by 1762, and was described as "a well accustomed Publick House" in 1792. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was famous for its pleasure gardens and in the 1920s it boasted a dance hall.

Although there were some "verie welthie" persons in Willesden in Elizabeth I's reign these were almost certainly only local farmers. The area was entirely rural and the population would have consisted of agricultural labourers.

### **The early 19<sup>th</sup> century**

By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century nearly all the woodland in the area had been cleared. Much of the land was used for hay farming. The survival of open fields to the west of Willesden Green meant that there was more land under the plough in Willesden than in other parishes near London.



The 'Spotted Dog', probably 1880

As early as 1787 a "compact new built freehold villa with numerous convenient offices, coach-house and stabling" was being advertised at Willesden Green. The advert was clearly

intended to attract a wealthy Londoner, as perhaps was the description of Willesden Green in 1817 as "a retired pleasant village, which appears as remote from London as at a distance of an hundred miles." This picture of a pleasant rustic spot ignored the fact that only a few years earlier Willesden Green had been a venue for bare-knuckle boxing matches and bull-baiting, attracting an altogether different class of Londoner. The vestry had put a stop to this in 1810 because it disrupted the hay harvest. Willesden remained famous for pigeon shooting, however. Later several shooting clubs would have connections with Willesden Green. The celebrated shotgun manufacturers Purdey's had a shooting ground in the area around 1860, while in 1887 the West Middlesex Rifle Volunteers owned a drill hall in Regency Terrace.

The village had 40 houses in 1823, including a large one built for Lord le Despenser. Another large property, Willesden House, stood west of the 'Spotted Dog'. In 1851 it was occupied by a successful dentist. After enclosure a number of cottages, owned by tradesmen and occupied by the poor, were built around the green and on Pound Lane (named after a brick animal pound demolished in 1895). One of these cottages survived as late as 1935. At least one hut was built by a squatter encroaching on the green. This dwelling, near the site of the present Willesden Green library, was still standing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1826 freehold building land near the present High Street was offered for sale, but with little success. By 1829 the population included a smith, a wheelwright, a coachmaster and a brewer. The last two had gone by 1851, but instead the village could boast a dame's school and a grocer. People still had to walk to Paddington to buy many goods. Another middle-class house, the Italianate 'Rose Villa', was built at the junction of Walm and Willesden Lanes around 1850. More had been constructed by 1855. Such houses were occupied by professional men, especially solicitors. Not much building occurred in these years, however.

During this period Londoners became involved in local farming, which was increasingly dependent on London's need for horses, hay and milk.

### **Railways and development**

The London & Birmingham Railway briefly opened a station called Willesden at Acton Lane in 1841, and then again from 1844 to 1866. It was not intended for suburban passengers and was a long way from Willesden Green. In 1866 it was replaced by Willesden Junction, most of which was not in the parish of Willesden. These stations had little direct effect on central Willesden.

The modern age crept out from London towards Willesden, with street lighting reaching the green in 1867. By 1876, although Willesden Green was still somewhere wealthy people moved out to in order to live in rural surroundings near to London, the picturesque village had been partially replaced by "mean brick cottages". Land was beginning to be sold for building, and once it became clear that the Metropolitan Railway intended to build a line a short distance north of the green this process accelerated sharply.

In 1873 the Grange estate was sold for development, although in fact the Furness family opened a brickworks there. George Furness (1820-1906) was a Derbyshire man who owned Roundwood House in Harlesden. He was involved in civil engineering projects from Cricklewood to Brazil. With the backing of the celebrated engineer Joseph William Bazalgette he built a considerable portion of the Thames Embankment from Westminster Bridge to Somerset House. He also rebuilt parts of Odessa (then in Russia, now in Ukraine) that had been damaged during the Crimean War.

In 1877 the United Land Company laid out streets northeast of the green, ready for the opening of Willesden Green station in 1879. In some people's eyes the houses that followed "absolutely ruined all the centre of Willesden as a residential district."

By 1882 Willesden House had been demolished and semi-detached houses stood along the north side of Willesden Lane, with roads and plots laid out to their north. More building followed. According to the 'Willesden Chronicle' the population rose from 100 in 1882 to 5,000 in 1887.



Station Parade, Willesden Green, just to the north of the Metropolitan Railway

Intense development occurred in the 1890s, covering virtually all the available land south of the railway. The houses were aimed at the lower middle classes. Willesden was the fastest growing district in Greater London. At one time in the 1890s four houses were being built in the area every day. By 1896 building on both sides of the High Street was well advanced, especially near the station. In 1898 Rutland Park Mansions, an impressive block of flats, was built on the east side of Walm Lane, on the site of 'Rose Villa'. The houses opposite were soon converted into much-needed extra shops.

Willesden Green farmhouse had been demolished by 1904. Willesden Green merged with Brondesbury to the southeast, Chapel End to the west and Harlesden and Kensal to the south. North of the railway the Buckingham estate was developed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, merging Willesden Green with Cricklewood.

## **Places of worship**

In 1880 St. Andrew's parish was created, with a permanent church on the High Road from 1887. The church was, and remains, very Anglo-Catholic, and its services were famous for 'bells and smells'. There were only 857 people in this parish in 1881, but its population had grown to 11,296 people by 1901. St. Gabriel's parish was formed to the north of the railway in 1898. Its population was 5,341 in 1901.

In addition to these Anglican churches many non-conformist chapels were set up. Houses in Willesden Green had been used by dissenters as early as 1815, and there were 10 chapels, including a large Baptist one, in the town by 1903. A Roman Catholic church and two convents were founded in the 1900s and another convent in 1928. A Jewish cemetery had been set up at Pound Lane in 1873. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was considerable Jewish immigration to Willesden Green.

## **The community**

As the larger houses were demolished and smaller ones were built Willesden Green's population became increasingly lower middle and working class. Most of the working class men worked in transport or building, and the women as domestic servants or laundresses.

At the same time the High Road turned into an impressive centre with many shops. Local employers, who in the 1870s had largely been stables, jobmasters (people who lent out horses) and horse dealers, were now much more varied.

People were constantly moving into and out of the area, so there was little sense of community. St. Andrew's did however provide a church school from 1882, and some useful social facilities including a men's club, a parish library and a soup kitchen. The kitchen may have been particularly useful during the slump that preceded the First World War. This hit the building trade especially hard and one resident remembers unemployed building

workers "parading the streets in groups and singing to a doleful chant 'We've got no work to do. We are poor 'onest workin' men, and we've got no work to do'."

A public house, the 'Victoria', existed in Willesden Lane by 1865. Surprisingly, only two more (the 'Case is Altered' and the 'Rising Sun') had opened by 1890. Other social facilities not supplied by the churches included a concert hall, a working men's club and Willesden Green Library, built in 1894 and extended in 1907. The library resulted from Willesden Local Board's decision to adopt the Free Libraries Act in 1891, a decision that was largely due to the efforts of Mr. W.B. Luke.



Willesden Green Library

### **The early 20<sup>th</sup> century**

By 1903 there were seven buses an hour running along Willesden Lane to Willesden Green. These connected with buses from Willesden Green to Harlesden (13 an hour by 1914). Electric trams running between Edgware and Cricklewood were extended to Willesden Green in 1906 and then on to Harlesden in 1907.

Development continued after 1901, especially north of the railway at Dudden Hill, although the slump slowed the pace after 1906. Part of the original green was still visible in 1907, but vanished shortly afterwards. A school opened in Pound Lane in 1903 and in 1918 a maternity and child welfare centre opened on the High

Road. The First World War brought more light industry, including the British Ensign Motor Company.



The window of George Waller's tailor's & clothier's shop, High Road, Willesden Green, around 1900

After the war gas lighting was replaced by electricity, while All Souls' built houses on the High Road (before 1924) and at Robson Avenue (1934). The Furness estate brickworks vanished, replaced by streets of large detached houses built between 1925 and 1939, while large semi-detached houses were built southeast of the green from 1927 to 1935. The population, however, did not rise significantly.

The Willesden Green Electric Palace cinema opened on 7<sup>th</sup> July 1910. Other cinemas came later. One of these, the Granada, became a bingo hall in 1962 and is now a church.



Willesden Green High Road in 1963.  
The large store to the right is the Co-op

## **Immigration**

Because of its proximity to Kilburn a number of Irish people moved into Willesden Green. During the Second World War many more, especially young men, came to the area to work in factories supplying the Allied war effort. St. Paul's Avenue, the eastern part of Chapter Road, seems to have had a particularly large Irish population by 1943. By 1966 14% of the population of Willesden Green were Irish. Other immigrants who arrived after the war were Afro-Caribbeans and, more recently, East African Asians and people from the Indian subcontinent.

## **After the Second World War**

After the war Willesden Green's population was 27,418, living in 4,260 houses and 1,196 flats. Willesden Council's plan called for industry and housing in the area between Willesden Green, Harlesden and Kensal Green. Redevelopment was recommended on both sides of the High Road, but apart from the demolition of a few of the "mean brick cottages" little was done in the 1950s or 1960s and the area declined. Shops, including a large Co-operative store, closed from the 1960s onwards, while traffic congestion blighted the High Road. Out-of-town superstores, such as Tesco's at Brent Park and Asda at Park Royal, began to drain customers away from the town centre. In



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